

Animals of Arid Australia: out on their own? (2007)

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The Royal Zoological Society of NSW is gaining a strong reputation for publishing useful volumes arising from their symposia. In recent years these volumes include a great deal more material than was actually part of the relative symposium. This is the case with the present volume, including an excellent foreword by Gordon Grigg, covering his years of research in arid and semi-arid zones.

I will start by pointing out a major gap in coverage. Reptiles are missing, which is odd given that reptiles are a major component of arid vertebrate faunas. There is the occasional mention, and a gekko makes the front cover, but basically this is a reptile-free zone.

As with most symposium volumes, there is a mix of papers; some are primarily research reports and others are essentially reviews. Actually there are only three that I would classify as research papers, two of which are based on state museum records: W. Ponder and C. Slater deal with freshwater molluscs; and C. Slatyer, W. Ponder, D. Rosauer and L. Davis deal with land snails. H. Jones deals with mussels, at the same time presenting some interesting data on hydrology.

The rest of the papers are reviews, and that is not a bad thing. As I have often said, reviews are of great value for students and for researchers working in different but related fields. That is not to say the so-called 'experts' do not read such volumes carefully. We do, mainly to be sure our own research has been covered.

Reviews cover:

- the Aboriginal Dreaming track system in relation to the arid conditions of Australia (D. Witter);
- the need to understand the arid landscape in order to maintain biodiversity and management (J. Kerle, M. Fleming and J. Foulkes);
- the impact of European settlement, especially the direct effect of livestock grazing, on native species in arid zones (M. Letnic);
- the landscape approach, particularly dealing with spatial and temporal variability and fragmentation (C. McAlpine, S. Phinn, T. Pople, N. Menke and B. Price);

competition between kangaroos and stock, particularly when conditions in the arid zone are poor and survival of kangaroos depend on juveniles (T. Dawson and A. Munn);

assessing impacts of vegetation management on fauna in south western NSW, a paper which includes a massive table with good data relating various tetrapod species with habitat (vegetation) and an estimate of habitat quality and permeability (M. Ellis, M. Drielsma, L. Mazzer and E. Baigent); and

the interesting question of whether man-made watering points should be removed or preserved in national parks (D. Croft, R. Montague-Drake and M. Dowle).

The final section, entitled "Current perceptions", contains four papers, a summary of the plenary session and a summary of the entire symposium by the editors.

The first paper in this section, by R.T. Kingsford, examines four case studies that deal with the relationship between policy functions of conservation bureaucracies and scientific information. The case studies give hope that policy shifts towards conservation can occur and can be influenced by science and the media. The important role of the media and the way in which scientific research can reach a wide audience are examined by P. Willis in "Taking the arid zone to TV".

Contributions from authors working in other fields can provide refreshing new insights or can be simply perplexing. The paper by L. Robin and M. Smith certainly provides a different perspective. I found it very interesting that they opted for using the term 'desert'. I have never understood the Australian hesitancy to use the term except for specific places (the Simpson Desert, the Little Desert, etc.), and this paper gives a brief discussion of the relation of 'desert' to 'arid zone' and 'rangeland'. Some clashes occur between the mindset of biologists and archaeologists. A biologist with a paleontological bent would hardly consider 100,000 years ago as "deep time". That was yesterday. A biologist might also be bemused by the statement that "Its focus on the humans in the

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landscape creates a space whether other knowledge systems can converse with it". Sounds good, but could mean anything.

Finally, J. Pickard reinforces the point that Australian citizens, especially politicians, rapidly forget the lessons of the past. He does this in regard to predator-proof fences, which is important in regard to the great expense of maintaining these structures.

My summary: a mixed volume; mixed in subject and quality, but well worth consultation by anyone interested in the arid and semi-arid zones (deserts even) of Australia.

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